

# Disaster Preparation and Emergency Management

Because our region faces a host of potential threats to our homes and our lives from earthquakes, flooding, mudslides, fire and acts of terror, disaster preparedness is an issue of utmost importance. Hurricanes Katrina and Rita demonstrated the weaknesses that exist within the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and we need to learn from their shameful mistakes to ensure we are better prepared for the next disaster that our country faces, either natural or manmade.

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## FEMA

The unprecedented national tragedy of Hurricane Katrina revealed the failures within our national disaster preparedness and response plan and we need to learn from these mistakes.

To that end, Rep. Eshoo cosponsored legislation to establish an independent, bipartisan Katrina Commission (modeled after the 9/11 Commission) to examine and evaluate the federal government's response to Hurricane Katrina and assess our ability to respond to future large-scale disasters. The Commission would have the same investigative powers which the 9/11 Commission had and would be tasked with finding the answers to the critical questions that must be asked.

Unfortunately, this proposal was blocked by the Majority Leadership and instead a partisan House Committee was established to examine the shortfalls of our response to the Katrina tragedy. While this Committee uncovered some of the more glaring inadequacies of FEMA's response, it

has not undertaken the comprehensive examination or implemented the substantial reforms necessary to ensure that such a massive failure of government ever occurs again.

Cleaning up the disaster sites and rebuilding Gulf Coast communities is a critical part of the recovery, but we need to do much more to strengthen our response to future disasters. Hurricane Katrina was the first major test of FEMA since it was reconfigured under the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and it was an unmitigated failure.

Rep. Eshoo has cosponsored H.R. 3659, the National Emergency Management Improvement Act, which removes FEMA from the Department of Homeland Security, restoring it as a fully independent agency. Rep. Eshoo has always believed FEMA should be independent, and she voted against its inclusion under DHS in 2002. H.R. 3659 would also require that FEMA be led by an emergency management professional reporting directly to the President. Former FEMA Director Michael D. Brown demonstrated the dangers of having an agency head who has neither any knowledge of the mission of the agency nor the professional wherewithal to lead it. This legislation would ensure this mistake is never repeated.

## FEMA Mitigation Grants

FEMA mitigation grants were created to give citizens a way to prepare for future disasters, thereby minimizing the damage they cause. These grants have proved to be extremely successful, saving millions of dollars in post-disaster funding as well as lives lost to natural disasters.

On June 28th of 2004, the IRS ruled that funds received through the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) Flood Mitigation Assistance Program, Pre-Disaster Mitigation Program and the Hazard Mitigation Grant Program must be included as gross income and are, therefore, subject to tax. Funds received through these programs are used for relocation, retrofitting property, foundation elevation, and other means to minimize future damages. This ruling blindsided many citizens across the country who participated in this program only to find the taxes they now owed on these grants could force them out of the homes they invested in.

Not only was this decision contrary to the intent of these grant programs, but the delay in notifying affected taxpayers caused considerable alarm. Rep. Eshoo met personally with IRS Commissioner Everson to urge him to provide temporary relief while Congress worked toward a legislative solution. Unfortunately, Commissioner Everson was unable to reverse this decision administratively.

Rep. Eshoo cosponsored legislation that ultimately overturned this ruling, clarifying that these grants were not to be considered as income for tax purposes. This legislation was signed into law prior to the tax deadline, saving thousands of grant recipients from outrageous tax liability.

These mitigation grants have proven their worth many times over, most recently when the San Lorenzo River overflowed in January, 2006. Residents who had participated in the mitigation program escaped substantial damage and have credited these grants as the reason.

### Levee Construction and Maintenance

More work needs to be done to bolster the Sacramento and Bay Delta levees to prevent a catastrophic breach, because a serious earthquake and levee failure would cause massive flooding, kill thousands, and jeopardize drinking water for 23 million people.

In the wake of the Hurricane Katrina disaster, Rep. Eshoo joined several of her California colleagues in sending a letter to the Chairman and Ranking Member of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Energy and Water Development to support funding for this effort. Although not all the funding was provided, Rep. Eshoo and her Colleagues were able to secure \$40 million for this important work.

Rep. Eshoo also helped secure \$600,000 for an Army Corps of Engineers study of the South San Francisco Bay Shoreline. This study is critical not only for the restoration of tidal marshes within the Don Edwards National Wildlife Refuge, but is also vital for the protection of the surrounding communities from a breach of the levees formerly maintained by Cargill, Inc. as part of its salt production operation.

Recently, Rep. Eshoo has worked with officials in East Palo Alto and San Mateo County to secure funding to repair a damaged levee in East Palo Alto. The levee protects East Palo Alto from the San Francisquito Creek and the San Francisco Bay, and its repair is vital to the safety of the community. In March, Rep. Eshoo issued an urgent plea to the Governor to send state funds and personnel right away to perform emergency repairs, and the City is now working with local and state government to restore the levee. In addition, Rep. Eshoo continues to work to secure federal funding for the Army Corps of Engineers for a plan that will provide a permanent solution to protect all the communities along San Francisquito Creek.

## Winter and Spring Storms

The series of storms that struck Northern California beginning in late December 2005 through April 2006 caused extensive damage to parts of the 14th Congressional District and prompted San Mateo and Santa Cruz Counties to declare disasters and to seek assistance from the state and federal government. Rep. Eshoo has consistently fought to secure the federal funding and resources needed to assist the state and local governments and ensure an effective disaster response in California.

The storms that hit Northern California in December and January brought heavy rain along with high winds, mudslides, and flooding and caused millions of dollars in damage locally. Rep. Eshoo joined her California colleagues in writing to President Bush urging him to grant the state's request for federal disaster assistance, which was ultimately secured for Santa Cruz and San Mateo Counties, among others.

On the heels of this disaster, in March and April, record-breaking rainfall and ensuing landslides closed roads and caused more than \$36 million in damage to critical public infrastructure in San Mateo and Santa Cruz Counties. Along the Coastside in San Mateo County, the closure of Highway 1 at Devil's Slide since April 2, 2006 has devastated the local economy and caused enormous traffic problems for Coastside residents. In Santa Cruz County, damage to roads has been so severe that the County's entire road system is in serious jeopardy. In order to facilitate the desperately needed repairs to critical infrastructure, Rep. Eshoo wrote to Governor Schwarzenegger in March and April requesting his immediate attention to the damage and urging him to request federal assistance right away. On May 10th, the state submitted a request for federal disaster assistance, and Rep. Eshoo has written to the President urging him to grant the request immediately. She is working with her California colleagues to support the state's request and ensure that the critical resources reach the communities where they are so urgently needed.

Federal assistance is an integral part of an effective disaster response in California, and Rep. Eshoo will continue to do all she can to ensure that the federal government provides the resources and services to assist state and local governments in their response.